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SENSITIVE
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM ECON ETRD BM VM
SUBJECT: President Triet Assures Ambassador that Relations Good,
Vietnam Remains Committed to Reform

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a cordial meeting August 18, State President Nguyen Minh Triet assured the Ambassador that Vietnam's leadership remained committed to deepening reform and viewed its relationship with the United States as positive and improving. Noting that Vietnam would chair ASEAN in 2010, Triet suggested that a U.S.-ASEAN Summit could be held in Hanoi and encouraged President Obama and Secretary Clinton to visit; he had little else to offer on the subject of Vietnam's tenure as ASEAN chair. The Ambassador agreed with Triet's upbeat assessment of bilateral relations, adding that the U.S. Embassy could do more with increased staffing. The Ambassador also urged Vietnam to press Burma to release Aung San Suu Kyi, a subject that would surely arise during Senator Jim Webb's August 19 meetings in Hanoi. President Triet and the Ambassador expressed differing views on human rights, though both pledged to continue dialogue. Triet voiced familiar positions on Agent Orange and U.S. restrictions on catfish imports. END SUMMARY.

Relations Good and Getting Better

¶2. (SBU) Meeting August 18, the Ambassador and Vietnam's State President Nguyen Minh Triet exchanged views on the overall state of bilateral relations. The Ambassador noted that it was two years to the day that he had presented his credentials to President Triet and praised cooperative efforts in the areas of education, climate change, and global and regional affairs. He said that the U.S. Embassy could do even more if long-standing staffing requests were met. Triet agreed that bilateral relations were on a positive trajectory. He waxed nostalgic about his trip to the United States in 2007 and praised as historic PM Dung's visit in 2008; he also recalled fondly the 2006 visit to Hanoi of President Bush, describing at some length the throngs of smiling well-wishers that had greeted the U.S. President on his arrival. Stressing that Vietnam would assume the ASEAN Chair in 2010, Triet said that Hanoi would be delighted to host a U.S.-ASEAN summit and extended invitations to President Obama and Secretary Clinton.

Deepening Doi Moi

¶3. (SBU) Responding to a question about the 11th Party Congress in 2011, President Triet emphasized that the Communist Party remained committed to its program of reform and opening ("renovation" or Doi Moi). (Note: Fellow Politburo member, Hanoi Party Secretary Pham Quang Nghi told the Ambassador nearly the same thing in their meeting the week before. Reftel. End note.) Triet said that

going into 2011, particular effort would be made to deepening Vietnam's international economic integration. Less convincingly, Triet insisted the 11th Party Congress would further implement what he called "socialist-oriented rule of law" through administrative and judicial reform.

Burma and ASEAN

¶4. (SBU) Previewing the August 19 visit of Senator Jim Webb, the Ambassador urged Vietnam to press Burma to release Aung San Suu Kyi so that more constructive dialogue could begin. President Triet commended the Obama Administration for its more "flexible" approach to Burma, as well as to Iran and North Korea, but offered little specific commentary. Asked what priorities Vietnam would bring to its ASEAN chairmanship, Triet was similarly nonresponsive, saying only that it was a bit early to discuss.

Human Rights

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¶5. (SBU) Though the conversation remained cordial throughout, the Ambassador and Triet offered starkly different views on human rights. The Ambassador said that recent incidents (such as violence at the Tam Toa Church ruins in Quang Binh and attacks on the Plum Village Order in Lam Dong) threatened to obscure progress in enlarging religious freedom. Triet said that as a student activist, he had himself been arrested without charge and beaten (presumably by the South Vietnamese authorities), and so was personally committed to human rights. Nevertheless, he said that Vietnam had a conflicted and difficult history, and it was unfair to judge his country by the standards of another. Taking a harder tone, he said that Vietnam's leadership was responsive to dissenting views, but insisted that opinions had to be "constructive." "Destructive" opinions were like sticks thrust into the spokes of a speeding bicycle, he said. Triet and the Ambassador agreed that whatever our differences, the best way to move forward was through continued dialogue.

Agent Orange and Catfish

¶6. (SBU) President Triet urged the United States to "play a more active role" in assisting "victims" of Agent Orange, noting that a USD 3 million cleanup effort, while welcome, was still small. He also urged the United States not to classify certain types of Vietnamese fish as catfish, arguing that this would unfairly harm local producers. On Agent Orange, the Ambassador noted progress in dioxin cleanup at the Danang airport hotspot and said that the United States was committed to further discussion of science-based solutions, both on health issues and to further environmental remediation. He took note of Vietnam's familiar position on catfish, and said that, as a larger issue, ongoing BIT and TIFA discussions were essential to furthering our already growing trade relations.

MICHALAK